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ABSTRACT

Social LIFE (Social Learning of Independence through Functional Experiences), a game used as a means of developing new social skills in a variety of settings and social situations and involving players and a mediator (instructor), is described. Appropriate responses to the game situations are rewarded by points or play money. Target behaviors or weak social skills are determined through various assessment devices such as behavioral surveys, interviews, and ecological inventories. Playing procedures include directions for moving around the board, time considerations, and suggestions for reinforcing the winners. Teaching techniques include instruction, descriptive feedback, positive reinforcement, practice, role-play, and active problem solving. Correct and incorrect responses are recorded by the mediator, and criterion is achieved when given behaviors reach 80% for three consecutive games. An important part of the process is generalization or transfer of skills from the game situation to real life settings. The skills can be practiced in both mediated and nonmediated environments. (Author/DB)

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The Social LIFE Game for Teaching Functional Social Competence: A Program Description

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Abstract

Social LIFE refers to Social Learning of Independence through Functional Experiences. The game-style approach is used as a means of developing new social skills in a variety of settings and social situations and is to be enjoyed by both the players and the mediator (instructor). Appropriate responses to the game situations in which individualized target behaviours performed are rewarded by points or play money. Target behaviours or weak social skills are determined through various assessment devices such as behavioural surveys, interviews, and ecological inventories. There are four card categories—give and take, right or wrong, fill-in, and role-play—in which the target behaviours are presented. Playing procedures include directions for moving around the board, time considerations, and suggestions for reinforcing the winners. Effective teaching techniques include instruction, descriptive feedback, positive reinforcement, practice, role-play, and active problem solving. Correct and incorrect responses are recorded by the mediator, and criterion is achieved when given behaviours reach 80% for three consecutive games. An important part of the process includes generalization or transfer of skills from the game situation to real life settings. The skills can be practiced in both mediated and nonmediated environments with the aid of the mediator.

Social LIFE refers to Social Learning of Independence through Functional Experience. The Social LIFE model is an effective, nonthreatening, and highly enjoyable game-style approach to developing new social skills. It is enjoyed by both players and the mediator (instructor), and much can be learned about social skills if it is played properly. Using this approach, a wide variety of skills have been established for a variety of settings and social situations such as work, school, home, with family, friends, intimate relationships, as well as within the community.

How Social LIFE Works

The objective of the game is for each player to advance around the board in a counter-clockwise direction and to amass points or play money by responding appropriately to situations which present individualized target behaviours. The game provides a teaching modality that is both

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motivating and fun. The teaching techniques used in the game reflect those that social skills research has demonstrated to be most effective: instruction, descriptive feedback, positive reinforcement, practice, role-play, and active problem solving. The combination of these approaches in training is most effective in achieving skill acquisition and generalization gains.

The Mediator

The role of the mediator is to direct attention to various features of modelled interactions in order to focus group assessment, engage the group in active problem thinking and prompt good reinforcement. As can be seen from the above description, the mediator is important to the success of the game. The mediator should be someone whom the players know, who knows the natural environments for which the social skills are intended, who is familiar with the strengths and needs of each player, who is involved in setting up, conducting, and generalizing the game, and who is familiar with the rules of the game. Most important, the mediator must be trained in the instruction techniques described above.

The Setting

The game is usually played in a familiar setting such as at home, school, or work. In ideal circumstances, the game is played in several natural environments using examples typical to that setting and natural reinforcement for the targeted behaviours. The setting should be comfortable and relatively free of distractions. The game is played on a table so that all players can have access to the game board and reach the cards.

The Players

As peer interaction is important, the game is most effective when played by three to four persons who have social contact and who work, live, or socialize together. The mediator can be a player. Criteria for being a player include the ability to both communicate (verbally or nonverbally) and learn to role-play (pretend), unless used in a family situation. It is preferable if the players are of the same age group. However, it is not advised that all players have the same behavioral needs because part of the function of the group is that the peers act as models and teachers.

Target Behaviours

The game situations used to teach are based on specific target behavioirs for each of the players. The situations may be taken from circumstances similar to those that have occurred or could occur within the range of possible life experiences of the player(s). Particular situations are chosen in which the client has experienced problems because of

a lack of skills, the expression of an inappropriate response, or because the situations represent antecedents that may have occasioned an inappropriate behaviour to occur.

Assessment of the individual's social skills can be made in a number of ways. We suggest all three be employed.

Behavioural Surveys

There are numerous behaviour scales and checklists available on the market. The one we found to be the best was the Structured Learning Skills Checklist (Goldstein, Sprafkin, Gershaw, & Klein, 1980). The Edwards Sociosexual Scale and the Tymchuck Social Behaviour Inventory provided areas of assessment of relationships and responsibility that were missing in most assessment measures.

Interviews

The client and his caregiver are interviewed. Strengths and needs are identified in order to delineate where, under what conditions, and with whom problem situations occurred. Specific situations are described in detail so that variations on these situations can serve as a basis for teaching. For each client up to six behaviours are targeted. Other targets can be set once these behaviours have reached criteria. The areas of communication, relationships, problem solving, and decision making are also examined in the context of the client's day.

Ecological Inventories

Behavioural observations of each of the target behaviours can be conducted in two ways. First, a traditional functional analysis baseline can be completed prior to training. In this baseline, a record is kept of the frequency of the target behaviour, the situation and conditions in which it occurred (antecedents), and the consequences that took place. Because most behaviours will be low frequency, this record is kept for at least two weeks. Second, the mediator may arrange a situation where the target behaviour would likely occur and then observe how the individual handled the situation compared to how someone without the problem would handle it. In this latter observation, we are attempting to understand the nature of the client's discrepancy from other individuals. This more detailed analysis of the specific components of the target behaviour allows the mediator to evaluate how specific (i.e., how small the steps in the task analysis) the game situations need to be in order to teach the new skill. This latter step is also important for the mediator to identify objectively that the individual's behaviour is not being changed arbitrarily but because the behaviour is so discrepant from other persons in the same setting that social stigmatization could

occur. It is vital to note that the client must be in agreement that these behaviours are perceived as problems and thus are in need of change.

Before the first session, the mediator should run through each of the cards and record whether the player is able to respond correctly or incorrectly. Of the approximately 24 cards for each player, a percentage correct should be determined. If the player is able to get 80% or more correct, it may be that:

1. the situations chosen do not actually reflect the learning deficits, and
2. the player already has the skills necessary but is failing to use the skills because of a lack of motivation, practice, or problem-solving skills to allow generalization.

In these cases, the social skills game may still be beneficial, however, the emphasis of the interaction should be changed depending on the assessment.

Preparing the Game

The game is played on a large board as illustrated in Figure 1. The board was designed to resemble Parker Brothers' Monopoly game because most clients are familiar with it. The game consists of the board, a die, four playing pieces, approximately 96 playing cards, and reinforcers. The reinforcers are chosen based on a prior interview with clients to determine what prizes they would enjoy winning. Prizes are rated in terms of desirability and a reinforcer menu is developed.

The Cards

For each client, approximately 24 cards are developed, about four for each of the target behaviours. Each target behaviour is presented in each of the four card categories: give and take, right or wrong, fill in, and role-play. There should be a minimum of 72 cards per game; however, there can be more to meet the needs of the client. Game cards are changed or added as the game progresses.

Give and Take Cards

This category of cards is instructional. The player is not required to provide a response. These cards are used to teach the group appropriate and inappropriate responses to the situation and to introduce the consequences that can be expected. Based on whether the situation presented describes an appropriate or inappropriate response, the player is either awarded or fined $5.00 or 5 points. Note, this is the only sequence of cards that uses a response cost. Although these cards do not specifically

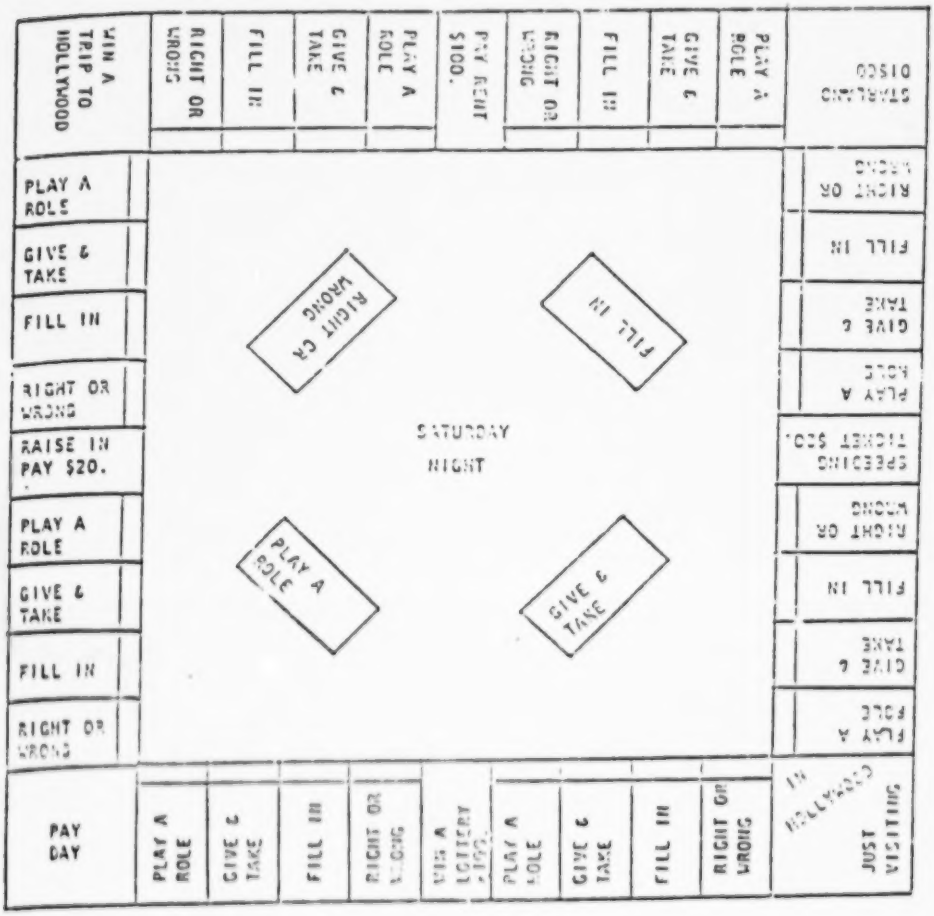

Figure 1

require a response from a player, the *reasons why the behaviour was appropriate or inappropriate and deserved the consequence are discussed.*

Give and Take Examples

Target Behaviour: Inappropriate affection situation: You just hugged someone you hardly know, lose $5.00.

Target Behaviour: Appropriate affection situation: Your girlfriend gets on the bus. Although you are happy to see her, you wait until you get home to give her a kiss. Gain $5.00.

Right or Wrong

These cards contain a statement which the player must judge to be a right or wrong way of handling the situation. As these cards require a response from the player, the correct response is rewarded with $10.00. These cards present either specific social situations or more general statements about social conventions. After responding to the card, the player is also asked for his or her reasons for giving the answer. In this way, the mediator can assess any misconceptions the player may have as to why the situation was appropriate or not. The group then decides if the response was correct, and alternatives and consequences are explored. The mediator can use knowledge from the assessment to help the group explore particular areas that are problematic for the players.

Right or Wrong Examples

It is OK to kiss your girlfriend on the bus. Right or wrong?
Asking my mother for a hug is OK. Right or wrong?

Fill-In Cards

These cards require the player to complete the description of the situation presented by filling in the missing information. These cards not only require the individual to assess the situation but also to generate his own alternatives, evaluate the consequences and choose the best. The reward for an appropriate response is $15.00. As in the situation of right or wrong, the individual explains why he or she chose the response presented. The group discusses the appropriateness of the response. Group consensus again dictates whether the response is worthy of the reward. In this series of cards, the mediator can take advantage of the fact that there are often many possible alternatives that could have been chosen and can identify with the group the reasons (situational events, consequences, feelings of others, probability of success), why one response might be better.

Fill-In Examples

Two good ways to show someone you like them are to _____.
When I am lonely, I _____.

Play a Role Cards

These cards require a player to role-play a situation with another player or the instructor according to the player's choice. The player is required to play act the best way of handling a social situation presented on the card. As these are the most difficult cards, a correct response, as determined by group consensus, results in a $20.00 reward. The group discusses why this response was a good alternative relative to its impact on

others, its social appropriateness, and the perceived consequences for the individual. Other options will also be explored based on the knowledge of the previous responses of the players to examine why some alternatives may be inappropriate. If the response is incorrect, the group will generate the best response through the problem-solving steps and then model it for the player.

Play a Role Examples

You feel lonely on a Saturday afternoon. Tell what you would do.

A guest comes to your home and is sitting next to you at dinner. Start a conversation.

The Squares

Most of the squares are color coded to correspond to the colors of the cards. By eliminating the need to read the category, the player simply needs to be able to match colors in order to pick the card. When a player lands on a square of a particular color, he is required to draw the top card of the same color. He or she can either read the card or can pass it to someone to read it for him or her. The color codes are as follows:

1. Blue - Play a Role
2. Red - Give and Take
3. Yellow - Fill-In
4. Green - Right or Wrong

In addition to the colored squares, provision is made for turns which do not require responses to social situations. These cards are included to relieve the pressure of always having to respond, to increase the fun and interest and make the interaction as game-like as possible. Therefore, this aspect can serve to motivate participation throughout the game and in subsequent sessions. These squares are intended to provide a chance to win and lose extra points, independent of social skills. These squares are as follows:

1. Payday - Plus $100.00
2. Win a Lottery - Plus $100.00
3. In Hollywood - No value
4. Speeding Ticket - Minus $20.00
5. Starland Disco - No value
6. Pay Rent - Minus $100.00

7. Win a trip to Hollywood - Move playing piece (no value)
8. Raise in Pay - Plus $20.00

Preparing the Game

The game board is placed on a table and the game cards are placed facedown in piles on the allotted spaces in the center of the board. The cards and spaces should be color coordinated. Each player's playing piece is put on "Pay Day," and each player starts with $150.00. The bank holds the remainder of the money. The players decide who will be the banker. The game begins with each player throwing the die and the player with the highest roll begins playing.

Playing Procedures

1. The player's turn begins by rolling the die, and the playing piece is moved in a clockwise direction the number of spaces showing on the die. When landing on a square, the player either draws the designated card, wins or loses money as described on the square, or "rests" on a free space. If a card has been drawn, the player must respond to it in a socially appropriate manner in order to win money.
2. The other players decide whether the answer is correct or incorrect. If the other players cannot reach consensus, the mediator will have the final say. If the player's response was judged successful, the player receives social reinforcement, the card value, and the play moves on to the next player (in a clockwise direction). If the player's response was judged unsuccessful, the group discusses the card in order to identify successful responses, and the most appropriate response is modelled. The player remains on the square, does not receive the card value, and the card is kept until the player's next turn. At the next turn, the player has the option of responding to the same card (the appropriate response was previously discussed and modelled, therefore, the probability of success is great) or of a drawing a new card. The allotted card value will be received for an appropriate response regardless of whether the same card or a new card was chosen. The group process provides a simulated social situation in which players can interact with their peers, receive instructions in appropriate behaviours, identify a range of potential consequences that each possible response might receive, decide on the best alternative, and practice the chosen behavior. Critical to the game is the interactional learning that occurs between the players, who provide feedback, reinforcement, correc-

tion, and modelling. In addition, the peers serve as a neutral cue to use these new skills once out of the training session.

3. In addition to judging the correctness of the response, the mediator engages the group in evaluating the response relative to other possible responses, the consequences and impact of each response, the potentially best choice and the evaluation of the benefit of the choice.

   Each card is mediated by a discussion of the problem and a simulated problem-solving session. This process not only provides the client with instruction but also the skills to make future determinations. The mediator should try to involve the whole group in the discussion. The mediator should not take on the role of "sole owner of the truth" but instead should build on the strengths of the group.

4. If the player lands on a space occupied by another player, then *each* player draws a card and is given the opportunity to respond. In this instance, successful responses are "paid" *double* the card value for each player.

5. Each player receives $50.00 each time he passes the "Pay Day" square.

6. The individual game is time limited according to the mediator's assessment of the players' needs and taking into account the players' level of motivation. The game should not continue until the players are tired of it; rather, it should be ended while they are still enjoying it and are enthusiastic about it so that they will look forward to the next game day. It is suggested that the game duration be no less than 30 minutes and no more than 90 minutes.

7. The game winner is the person who has collected the most game money within the allotted time.

8. The game ends with the players using their winnings to "purchase" items.

9. In addition to the social reinforcement delivered during a game by the mediator, tangible reinforcers are given after the game. A reinforcement inventory is filled out by each player before the first game is played. The preferred item for a given player costs $500.00 of game money, second choice costs $450.00, third choice $400.00, and so on until the eighth choice which costs $150.00. The list can include any of a variety of activities or items such as toys, movie tickets, prizes, food, make-up, video cassettes or albums, going out for lunch, and so forth. Players can save money over games to earn

a top prize. It is important to insure that each player earns money during the game, and each player is able to buy something.

10. The number of games played depends on players' needs (i.e., making less than two errors on target cards per game for two consecutive games). However, the target is usually 80% successful responses over three consecutive weeks. It should be noted, though, that one can expand the cards, write new ones, and so forth, and continue the game as long as it is helpful and enjoyable.

11. The game should not be played any less than once per week, or more often than three times per week. If the game is played too infrequently, the players may not remember what they learned and progress will be slowed. If the game is played too frequently, like any other game, the players will tire of it.

12. The time, place, and players should be consistent from game to game until players have achieved the goals set for the game. In this way, distractions, tardiness, and confusion are minimized, and players can look forward to each game time.

Recording Change

During each game, the mediator should record whether a player responds correctly or incorrectly to one of his or her own cards. This should give a percentage correct for each game. The data sheet identifies which of the player's behaviours were correctly or incorrectly responded to. A weekly tally can be made to determine the percentage correct for each behaviour. When given behaviours have reached 80% for three consecutive games, the individual can be assumed to have reached criterion.

Generalization

Skills learned in the game serve no real purpose unless they become part of the daily behaviour repertoire of the client. Generalization involves transferring expectations from the game to the real life settings and placing the skills in a real life context. Generalizing from one environment to another is difficult at best with social skills and particularly for persons with handicaps. Nevertheless, we have found generalization to occur with some clients as a natural result of the Social LIFE game. Some clients need a method to transfer the skills. There are three steps in the process of generalizing the skills from the game to everyday behaviours: reaching criteria, practicing skills, and reinforcing skills.

Reaching Criteria

Once the client reaches the game criteria set for determining competence in a skill targeted for change, the process toward generalization begins. It can be a mistake to wait until full criteria on all behaviours is met before beginning the process as this can lead the mediator to see the generalization process as discrete blocks rather than as an interactive process. Also, it allows the mediator the opportunity to use the real life experiences in the game and to foster discussion around issues practiced in the stages of generalization.

Practicing the Skill

Moving from the game to real life situations can be difficult for the client. The mediator can assist in this process through the use of many of the techniques used in the game: modelling, prompting, and providing positive and corrective feedback to the natural environment, as well as providing adaptations for clients who cannot perform the skills independently. This teaching of generalization is usually the part of the program that is most often neglected or not fully carried out.

Practice can be done in several ways:

1. The mediator can create simulated practice situations in the natural environment or in situations which include components from the natural environment.
2. The mediator may provide opportunities for "safe" practice where trials are accompanied by the mediator and where prompting and reinforcement are still provided by the mediator.

Mediated Environments

By enlisting the support of "significant" others from the beginning of the program, some "natural" generalization will occur as they discuss with the players what the players are learning during the game. In the generalization stage, you may wish to be a little more formal and request information as to how the person is handling the situations that arise in those environments as well as setting up situations for the player to practice. It is important that when approaching the "other" mediators, you do so with permission of the client. It may be best to meet with the other mediator and the client to discuss practicing these skills in that environment. Again, you can use these examples as a basis for reinforcement or discussion in the group.

Non-Mediated Environments

Environments without mediators are perhaps the most difficult to generalize as there is no one you can enlist for help (although, in some

cases, mediators can be found by enlisting the aid of, for example, a store clerk or a restaurant waitress, but care regarding confidentiality must be taken). In these cases, the mediator may want to accompany the player to those environments and watch from afar. This may not be the most natural way of generalizing but it may be the only expedient way of getting reliable information. Again, successes and failures can be dealt with in the group as outlined above.

Reinforcing Skills

It is important to ensure that the generalization sessions provide a high degree of reinforcement for the client for performing the skills outside the game. Initially, the clients may need a great deal of reinforcement for showing the behaviour in the simulations or in real life. This is particularly true if they have had a long history of failure. The form of reinforcement used is generally social, in the form of specific, descriptive feedback. However, an occasional activity reinforcer for a session well done is also very rewarding. This system of reinforcement should continue both during and after the generalization process. We all receive regular reinforcement for our social skills, and we should ensure that the clients receive that reinforcement at a natural rate. The mediator at this stage will be pulling back as the client becomes more and more confident, and the reinforcement slack must be picked up elsewhere. At this point, the mediator may need to teach the clients how to recognize the natural reinforcers.

Conclusion

The generalization process must be watched with great care as this transition of skills can be more difficult than the actual teaching. By enlisting the aid of other mediators, by ensuring the opportunity for real life practice, and by providing feedback on the performance, you will be more likely to succeed. Make sure the client feels comfortable with the generalization pace and ensure that you are not setting the client up for failure by beginning the process too soon.